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Looking for the ordinary? Parental choice and elite school avoidance in Finland and Germany

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ABSTRACT

Middle-class parents' strategies of reproduction and social closure and their role as a driver of school segregation are already well-reported. Our two independent research projects in Finland and Germany have additionally revealed a somewhat surprising and not yet fully understood tendency of certain middle-class parents to actively avoid the most reputable schools. Using these findings as a starting point, the paper investigates the motives and reasoning behind middle-class parents' avoidance strategies in the cities of Espoo (Finland) and Mülheim an der Ruhr (Germany). The analysis shows that in educational transitions where choice is not constrained by a risk of children being left behind, some families with high educational resources and imbued with a certain ethos give precedence to 'ordinary' schools over highly selective elite schools. If this ethos can be skilfully integrated into urban educational policies, it may help develop effective equality strategies supported by parents and seen as justified by them.

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Introduction

In many European countries, educational systems are increasingly affected by school segregation, typically reflecting both the growing socio-spatial differentiation around the schools and the selective choice strategies of highly educated parents. The massification of (higher) education has led to growing competition for access to universities and prestigious jobs. Education has thus become one of the main priorities of middle- and upper-middle-class parents, driving them to search for the best schools for their children (Bourdieu, 1984; Butler & Hamnett, 2007). According to a growing body of research, the majority of pupil flows are thus directed towards schools with better educational outcomes and largely driven by middle-class parents' preferences regarding their composition (Boterman, 2013; Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Byrne, 2006; Van Zanten, 2013; Vowden, 2012). Since mainly higher-educated parents find ways to gain access to these schools, parental choice often feeds into growing school polarization by 'segregating students by ability, socio-economic background' and generating 'greater inequities across education systems' (Musset, 2012, p. 10). This tendency is also visible in Finland and Germany.

In line with previous research, parents' narratives in our samples – produced in two independent research projects on school choice in Finland and Germany – confirm the general trend towards increased school

segregation. Focusing on both a school's presumed quality of education and its composition – often assumed to be closely linked – parents in both studies refer to quite selective choice strategies and active practices of dissociation. Depending on the (local) education system and its enrolment procedures, middle-class parents use a variety of strategies to avoid 'undesired' schools with 'undesired peer groups' (Kosunen, 2014; Kosunen & Carrasco, 2016).

However, apart from well-reported strategies of dissociation, both studies additionally revealed an interesting and as yet not extensively discussed tendency of some middle-class parents to actively avoid the most reputable schools. Describing these schools as too 'elitist' – with regard to both their educational offering and their socio-economic composition – these parents instead try to find an ordinary, 'good enough', school. Their attitudes do not reflect unsuccessful attempts to gain access to elite schools, as the narratives analyzed come solely from families not seeking admittance to such schools. Thus, the quest for educational 'excellence' or selective peer groups – something which international studies of educational policy tend to emphasize – seems not always to be the primary concern in school choice, at least not for a minority of parents. This rather surprising finding produced in two independent studies on parents' school choice practices in two quite distinct contexts, Finland and Germany, is the starting point for this paper.

The paper focuses on the minority of middle-class parents in both studies avoiding the most reputable schools. It analyzes and discusses their motives and the explanations given for their strategy of what we call 'elite avoidance' both in Espoo in the capital area of Helsinki, Finland and Mülheim an der Ruhr, Germany. The paper examines these parents' unusual practices in the context of their local and national backgrounds and additionally seeks to illustrate similarities and differences between parents' practices in both contexts. By exclusively focusing on this minority of parents deliberately favouring 'ordinary' neighbourhood schools – who do not differ from the whole sample with regard to social characteristics – the paper's aim is to describe and analyze the logic behind the choices in relation to the different contexts in which they are observed. The main research question in this paper is thus: *What school choice motives do well-educated parents in these two different national and social settings express when actively seeking 'non-elite' schools?*

Finland and Germany provide an interesting comparative case due to certain similarities, but at the same time noticeable differences in their educational and welfare systems. Both countries have public education systems including non-fee-paying schools and a comparatively small number of state-subsidized private schools. However, whereas Finland has for years been one of the top-ranking countries in both educational outcomes and educational equality, Germany is known for its selective track system and a strong relationship between a child's social background and its educational achievements (OECD, 2016). Moreover, rooted in the strong Nordic welfare state, Finnish schools are among the least segregated in the world (Bernelius & Vaattovaara, 2016). Considering these quite different contexts, the similarity of our findings produced in two independent research projects – the starting point for this paper – is striking.

Comparative studies open up new ways of analyzing persisting patterns and varied dynamics, especially in the case of similar patterns in different contexts (Steiner-Khamsi, 2009). They help gain a better understanding of the complex relationship between all dimensions of choice – from educational policies to individual rationalities, values and practices (Kosunen, 2016; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007). In our case, while the two studies were not originally designed as a comparison, they were deliberately re-designed as such after noting the striking similarities between earlier findings. While both studies generally confirmed previous research illustrating middle-class' parents' selective choice practices leading to increasing segregation levels, the rather small number of parents bucking this trend at first seemed to be of too marginal interest. However, observing these 'unusual' practices in both

studies attracted our attention and – despite the slight differences in parents' reasoning – seemed to point to the existence of persisting choice patterns in different urban, educational or social contexts. Based on the similar research design of both studies – in particular the conduct and content of the qualitative interviews – and the shared theoretical framework on which the original data collection was designed, the interview data of both studies was re-analyzed, looking at the explanations and motives behind parents' rather unusual school choices, not only against their own background, but additionally from a comparative Finnish–German perspective.

Starting out from these strikingly similar, but 'unusual' choice practices, this paper explores theoretically interesting aspects of choice patterns with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the similarities in school segregation patterns at international level. This is particularly important since European cities and the educational systems rooted in them are increasingly affected by similar patterns of segregation, while school segregation has been identified as one of the key challenges in education (OECD, 2012; Tammaru, Marcińczak, Aunap, & van Ham, 2017). Questions of finding ways to manage parental choice and alleviate school segregation are therefore becoming more pressing. Comparative perspectives like in this paper – even if not originally designed as comparisons – offer particularly fruitful perspectives for developing further research projects and for refining our theoretical understanding of European educational dynamic to formulate sustainable educational policies in urban environments.

Theoretical approaches to school choice in Europe

Middle-class parents' strategies of social distinction and their impact on educational segregation have already been widely discussed in previous studies (Ball, 2003; Boterman, 2012; Butler & Robson, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Vowden, 2012). As urban areas across Europe become more segregated, the environment in which schools operate also becomes differentiated. Local variations in educational attainment, employment, crime and other dimensions of (dis)advantage affect the social fabric and reputation of neighbourhoods, which is further reflected in the schools' student bases. A growing body of research has highlighted the link between residential and school segregation in urban areas where the socio-economic structure of the neighbourhood affects the initial selection of a school's student base and may even affect its educational outcomes (Andersson, Östh, & Malmberg, 2010; Bernelius, 2013; Harjunen, Kortelainen, & Saarimaa, 2018; Nieuwenhuis & Hooimeijer, 2015; Riedel, Schneider, Schuchart, & Weishaup, 2010). This interaction is particularly strong

when school allocation is regulated through catchment areas and when residential mobility is the principal way of ensuring access to the ‘right’ schools (Rangvid, 2007; Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011). Through strategies such as circumventing (sometimes illegally) allocation regulations, school segregation is additionally reinforced by parental choice (Noreisch, 2007a; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007; Vowden, 2012). Parents in many countries try to ‘solve’ the problem by opting out of the state school system and applying for private education. In Finland and Germany, however, private education plays a comparatively minor role. Parents’ selective choice strategies thus focus predominantly on state school alternatives.

‘In an era when a good education means getting the qualifications necessary to go on to university’ (Butler & Hamnett, 2007), middle-class parents’ search for the ‘right’ school – a school providing all opportunities necessary to ensure social reproduction – is based on quality criteria, measured for instance by pupils’ educational performance. At the same time, school choice appears increasingly dependent on a school’s social and ethnic composition (Boterman, 2013; Byrne, 2006; Karsten, Ledoux, Roeleveld, Felix, & Elshof, 2003; Vowden, 2012). In addition to parents’ concerns about the social backgrounds and behavioural tendencies of their children’s classmates, they strongly associate a school’s composition with educational quality. Middle-class parents – in contrast to their working-class counterparts – are greatly inclined to choose, knowing how to ‘play the game’ and ensure access to the ‘right’ schools (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015; Rangvid, 2007; Reay et al., 2011; Vincent & Ball, 2001). Musset (2012, p. 34) summarizes such behaviour:

“Although parents may be concerned about equity and integration and may support their neighbourhood school, they seek at the same time the “best” education for their children. [...] Research shows that parents prefer schools with populations ethnically and socio-economically similar to their own family [...] As disadvantaged families tend to send their children to their local school, more advantaged families make segregating choices: as a result, the level of segregation in schools is high and exceeds the level of residential segregation.”

Similar to previous studies, a strong social selectivity of parental choice has also been revealed in both Finnish and German urban contexts (Bernelius, 2013; Bernelius & Vaattovaara, 2016; Groos, 2015; Kosunen, 2016; Maloutas & Ramos Lobato, 2015; Noreisch, 2007b; Ramos Lobato & Weck, 2017; Riedel et al., 2010; Seppänen, 2006; Seppänen, Rinne, & Sairanen, 2012). As illustrated, the majority of families opting for choice have a higher-than-average educational level and pupil flows are strongly directed towards schools with higher socio-economic composition and educational outcomes. Consequently, in both contexts parents’ selective choice

has led to an increase in school segregation with regard to educational outcomes and student composition (Groos, 2015; Kosunen, Bernelius, Seppänen, & Porkka, 2016). By actively dissociating themselves from the most reputable schools and their ‘too elitist’ socio-economic composition, a minority of parents in our studies prefer to look for ‘ordinary’ schools. This paper thus seeks to understand their ‘unusual’ deliberate choice of schools outside this ‘elite’ hierarchy.

Previous studies show that choice strategies vary among middle-class cohorts, depending on parents’ divergent endowment with economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and their different value systems and (educational) ideals partly reflecting national and societal ideologies (Boterman, 2013; Butler & Robson, 2003; Noreisch, 2007a; Vincent & Ball, 2006). Although not yet quantified in size and scope, some middle-class parents opt out of the mainstream by deliberately enrolling their children in socially and ethnically mixed state schools (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Byrne, 2006; Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Reay et al., 2011, 2008; Van Zanten, 2007; Vowden, 2012). Apart from their preferences for an urban lifestyle ‘forcing’ certain parents to just accept the ‘good enough’ state school within the city (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013), many of these decisions reflect parents’ appreciation of diversity and a progressive political ideology trying to contribute to the public good and social justice (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Hollingworth & Williams, 2010; Reay et al., 2011) – as also observed in the Finnish case study. However, the compatibility of social ideals and individual concerns frequently produces tensions and dilemmas between being a ‘good citizen’ – and trying not to heighten social and ethnic segregation – and being a ‘good parent’ by giving priority to their own child’s future position (Breidenstein, Krüger, & Roch, 2014; Frank & Weck, 2018; Oria et al., 2007; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007). Consequently, the presence of parents ‘like us’ is particularly important ‘because it engenders a sense of safety and reassurance about a decision perceived by some to be “risky”’ (Posey-Maddox, McDonough Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014, p. 449). The comparatively high confidence of parents in avoiding the schools seen as too ‘elitist’ found in our studies therefore seems somehow surprising.

Setting the context: Finnish and German schools in the city

Reflecting the core values of the Nordic welfare state, the Finnish school system is known as egalitarian and comprehensive. School quality is universally seen as high and stable. At local level, municipalities have the right to decide on allocation policy. In the Finnish context, this paper focuses on a research study

conducted in Espoo, a city in the Helsinki metropolitan region with approximately 250,000 inhabitants. Espoo has promoted parental choice through specific geographical and governmental regulations, which, in a way, guide parents in their choices. Parents may express a preference for a general class in one of the neighbourhood lower-secondary schools within the catchment area or apply for a class with a special emphasis – e.g. music or mathematics – in any of the schools in Espoo or in neighbouring cities providing such classes – resulting in differentiation between the parallel classes in one school (Kosunen, 2014; 2016; see also Berisha & Seppänen, 2016; Seppänen, Carrasco, Kalalahti, Rinne, & Simola, 2015). Urban residential segregation has traditionally been moderate in the whole region, but has grown noticeably over the last three decades (Kortteinen & Vaattovaara, 2015; Vilkkama, Lönnqvist, Väliniemi-Laurson, & Tuominen, 2014), leading to a significant increase in the socio-economic and ethnic differentiation of schools since the 1990s (Bernelius, 2013).

Although the major influence of a child's social background on its educational success has been significantly lowered over the last years (OECD, 2016), the German educational system is – by contrast – still known for its comparatively high level of social selectivity and inequality. After four years of comprehensive schooling at primary school, pupils are segregated into different educational tracks with different orientations. The Gymnasium is the highest secondary track, leading directly to university. Since switching from a lower to a higher track remains the exception (Bellenberg & Forell, 2012), the transition from primary to secondary school is a crucial step in a child's educational career. Access to primary schools is predominantly regulated by catchment areas. However, the federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW) – in which our study city, Mülheim an der Ruhr, is located – introduced free primary school choice in 2008. With its 170,000 inhabitants, Mülheim is part of the Ruhr area, an old industrial polycentric urban area in NRW characterized by a comparatively polarized social geography. Though poverty is increasing, especially among children, its high share of high-income inhabitants means that Mülheim is nevertheless one of the wealthier cities in NRW (especially in the Ruhr area). Moreover, similar to the location of Espoo in relation to Helsinki, it is located within commuting distance of Düsseldorf, the capital of NRW.

The two studies focus on distinct educational stages of children of different ages – lower-secondary school in Finland and primary school in Germany. However, since the stakes in both systems as regards the transition to the next educational stage are similar, the operational logic of choice is comparable. Whereas in the Finnish case, pupil assessment at the end of lower secondary school is done via universal criteria, in

NRW, the decision on the secondary school track to be followed is taken by the parents themselves. Thus, in both systems 'the risks of making a bad choice' (Kosunen, 2014), i.e. choosing a school that might deny access to higher-status schools in the following educational stage, are relatively small. Further similarities enable a comparative perspective: Both systems are public, the comparatively few private schools are almost completely state-subsidized, and schools are feeless. Both educational stages are comprehensive, historically based on the 'one school for all' principle, and in both contexts, access has developed from catchment areas to the current free choice system.

Methodology

The paper is based on two independent studies initially not designed for a comparative analysis, but nevertheless allowing a new, joint analysis of the datasets within a common framework. Avoiding the construction of a de-contextualized comparison or culture insensitivity (Steiner-Khamsi, 2009), the paper's aim is to portray and understand the logic of parental choice practices in both cities through analyzing each case in its own background. While both studies originally examine (well-educated) parents' school choice practices and their motives in general, this paper concentrates on that minority of middle-class parents whose 'unusual' practice of avoiding the most reputable schools clearly deviates from the 'norm' found in both datasets.

The Finnish study is based on 73 parent interviews conducted as part of a larger research project on parental choice of secondary schools and the construction of symbolic hierarchies of reputation across schools in the city of Espoo (2011) (Kosunen, 2014). All interviewees had at least one child transferring to lower secondary education (12–13-year-olds). They were invited to the personal interview after answering a city-wide survey about school choice on Wilma, the online school application system. The sample comprises parents from every lower-secondary school of the city, all having a middle or upper middle-class status, defined by the combination of educational level (tertiary education), occupational status (e.g. managers, engineers, teachers) and income. The tension between pushing for excellence or striving for the ordinary in education was discussed in all interviews.

The German study is based on 35 interviews (12 of them with middle-class parents, defined – due to a lack of information on economic capital – by their educational attainment¹) conducted as part of a PhD project on parental choice of primary schools and the role of networks at kindergarten for parents' choice strategies (2016). They were recruited and invited to a personal interview during a participatory observation in three kindergartens all located in two inner-city

neighbourhoods of Mülheim. Except for three refusals, all parents in these kindergartens who had to register their children for primary school were interviewed. The 12 middle-class parents all had at least a higher education entrance qualification or tertiary education and occupations, such as a doctor, tax consultant or assistant manager in office communication. In both contexts, this paper refers only to the minority of middle-class parents deliberately avoiding the ‘best’ schools in practice (around one in five of the interviews in both contexts), even if related ideas were discussed broadly in other interviews as well.

Both studies originally sought to examine parents’ school choice strategies and followed a quite similar theoretical path, building on the European bourdieusian research tradition of the role of class and cultural and social capital for (middle-class) parents’ school choice strategies and social distinction (mainly Ball, 2003; Reay et al., 2008, 2011; Van Zanten, 2007, Vincent & Ball, 2006). Within the semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in both contexts, parents were asked about their choice criteria, such as school reputation or peer-group composition, their information sources, their conceptions of schooling, including the significance of active choice-making and their involvement in choice. Thus, both projects pursued similar research questions and followed a congruent research design, including their interview guidelines. In both studies, interviews were mainly conducted with one parent (predominantly the mothers) without their children being present. They lasted on average 1.5 h, were fully transcribed and analyzed. To validate the opportunities of analyzing both studies from a comparative perspective, the data was reopened and reanalyzed within this joint framework. The paper thus builds on a novel analysis of pre-existing datasets. In a second step, the results of this re-analysis were comprehensively discussed during a joint workshop. Similarities and differences between choice practices and explanations for them were both portrayed against their particular backgrounds and afterwards collectively discussed and jointly structured for the paper.

There are two sampling differences between the two studies, which we took into consideration when reanalyzing our data for this study. First, the divergent classifications of middle class seem to produce minor differences between the two samples. The additional use of parents’ occupational status and their income as classification criteria in the Finnish study seems to result in a sample with a slightly higher level of economic capital, in part affecting parents’ motives for avoiding the most reputable schools. This must be kept in mind for further analysis. Nevertheless, the middle classes in the two cities were adjusted to fit the local sphere in which they operated. As the Espoo area also includes the absolute elite of Finland (unlike Mülheim in the German

scope), the paper focuses on the middle-class practices in each study and excludes the elite. Consequently, the parents’ cultural capital in both samples is comparable. Moreover, since cultural capital in particular is needed to encode/decode knowledge of schools (Lareau, 1987; Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2010), the study provides an interesting window for comparative education studies.

Second, the size of both samples differs since the German study did not originally focus exclusively on middle-class parents. However, it contains interviews with (almost) all parents with children moving on to primary school in the selected kindergartens – and not only with a selection of them – and is supplemented by an extensive participatory observation (six weeks in each kindergarten) with frequent and regular contacts and conversations with the parents, enabling a more in-depth assessment of parental narratives and thus increasing the analysis’s intensity and reliability tremendously. The datasets have been reanalyzed for the purposes of this study, with sensitivity to the contextual differences and case-specific details within each dataset.

Looking for the ‘ordinary’: parents’ school choice practices and their (similar) motivations

Apart from the ‘increasing view of parents as consumers shopping for the “best” schools in a competitive marketplace’ (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014 after Chubb & Moe, 1990), few parents in either study appear to actively avoid these schools, describing them as too ‘elitist’ and ‘competitive’. The similarity of their practices is particularly striking considering the strong and ingrained differences between the systems in which they occur. The following section thus illustrates both similarities and differences between parents’ motives, analyzing them in their specific contexts. The comparative perspective may yield possibilities for developing more inclusive educational policies, as the expressed values, concerns or ideals may be shared by or introduced to other families – even if their actual choices were initially motivated by other factors.

Avoidance of competition and stress

The ‘elitist’ schools’ good reputation is mainly based on their high standard of teaching, extensive curricula and subsequent optimal preparation for the highest level of secondary education, namely the Gymnasium in Germany and the academic secondary track, lukio, in Finland. Despite their perceived high educational quality, some middle-class parents in our samples expressed explicit disinterest in these schools, often using the term ‘elitist’ to describe their perceived high status, outstanding reputation and exceptional educational achievements. One main driver of avoidance was concerns about harmful competition

at the ‘elitist’ schools and the subsequent psychological stress it might provoke.

“Yes, I’m really against putting all of them in the same school; then having all the talented in there. That will only create awful pressure that you always have to be even more talented than others; that you always have to get more than full marks in everything. The competition is just so hard in there.” (Linda, Finland)²

“According to the other parents, this school is the best school in the whole city. It is very much focused on educational achievement. However, we didn’t even consider applying for this school because [...] it is too much focused on educational achievement and tests. [...] I would have had serious concerns at that school because of this pressure.” (Sofia, Germany)

Since the presumed high educational quality is feared to be closely related to a high level of competitiveness and pressure to perform, certain parents instead focus more on their child’s wellbeing and ‘blossoming’ (Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007), looking for schools with a more child-oriented atmosphere. In Mülheim, some parents even completely escape the state school system and apply to a private Waldorf school associated with the absence of any form of competition and educational pressure.

“I said then that I’m not letting my kid go into those selective classes [in the school with the most prestigious reputation], because it’s far too competitive there, but our own school [with a specialized class] was a good solution. Actually, I also thought that it was good because of being close to friends and the fact that it was so close to our house.” (Maria, Finland)

“In the other school [the school they actually chose], the children also learn quite well and they have to perform as well. However, from all that I have heard, the teachers are very kind, not that strict, they cater to children’s needs; the children just feel comfortable there.” (Helen, Germany)

As illustrated by the last quote, however, implicit pressure to conform to dominant norms of school matching and reputation (Van Zanten, 2013) seems to make it difficult to resist the mainstream choice and to turn down the reputable ‘best’ schools. In particular, parents in the German case therefore often tried to justify their choices by emphasizing the chosen schools’ high educational quality as being comparable to the ‘elitist’ ones.

Fears of ‘elitist’ socialization and social pressure

Apart from their concerns about a high level of competition, parents’ avoidance in both studies is additionally related to the expected social pressure at the ‘elitist’ schools. Fears of children being out of place and bullied at school are known from previous studies, although

these predominantly refer to middle-class children attending schools with a high share of lower social class groups (Van Zanten, 2013; Vowden, 2012). In our research, however, parents were more worried about the psychological stress and the social (and economic) pressure emerging in an upper-class environment. Consequently, parents in both studies were worried about their children becoming social outsiders.

“At least from the friends’ kids that are [in these elite schools], we have noticed that there is quite a lot of bullying and such, so it is not always... Actually, it doesn’t sound all that nice for the kids. Of course, it is really neat for the parents: Oh, I have my kids [in this elite school], but that’s not at all important to me.” (Paula, Finland)

“I was educated in a Gymnasium where all parents had a lot of money. Their children all wore clothes from Hugo Boss, Diesel and Levi’s. This can put you under pressure.” (Kim, Germany)

Especially in the German study – whose sample mainly comprises middle-class parents with comparatively lower economic capital – the avoidance of the highly ‘elitist’ schools is strongly linked to the expected high level of economic capital among the families at ‘elitist’ schools and the subsequent compulsion to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ in terms of clothes, leisure activities, etc. This feeling also applies to some of the parents in the Finnish study. In these cases, the active avoidance of the ‘best’ schools is often related to the parents’ own painful experiences when being a child and not being able to blend in with other well-off children.

Nevertheless, it is too simple to ascribe parents’ reluctance solely to their apparently lower economic capital. Their practices also constitute a conscious strategy of avoiding the effects of socialization in such an ‘elitist’ environment. Thus, in contrast to previous research illustrating middle-class parents explicitly striving for schools with a higher socio-economic composition, the parents we focus on in this paper expressed serious concerns about their children becoming out of touch with society and losing their sense of the ‘real world’ (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Hollingworth & Williams, 2010). The way ‘elitist parents’ were presumed to deal with money raised fears among the parents studied of spoiling their own child and of undermining their social values and concepts of education.

“We are both products of the public, municipal system and we really didn’t see any reason to send our kids to some [elite class]. [Interviewer: Why?] Basically, because those schools produce elitist assholes.” (Johannes, Finland)

“Almost all parents with a university degree, who earn good money, really good money, want to send their children to this school. [...] Since I’ve heard

stories about how these children behave, I must admit that, although I would be able to drive my son every day to this school, I just don't want to." (Lara, Germany)

As the quotations above illustrate, concerns are not only related to the risk of not being able to keep up with certain social or economic expectations of the peer group – which is based on slightly different samples particularly relevant in the German study – but also to children being influenced by negative 'elitist' attitudes and socialized into cultural norms and behaviours perceived as arrogant and haughty.

Embracing the 'good enough' school

Apart from deliberately rejecting 'elitist' schools due to psychological stress, social competition and an overly 'elitist socialization', some parents simply do not seem to strive for the 'best' schools, viewing local schools as completely acceptable. Although these parents were well aware of the differing reputations of schools – or classes in Espoo – the 'best' school just did not appear to be a necessity.

"If you are super talented, then it's different, or if you are otherwise really different from average, then we can try to accommodate special needs, but that's not how it is with us. Let's keep a cool head with this." (Rasmus, Finland)

"I think if the child is smart, then he or she will get the recommendation for Gymnasium anyway – independent of the primary school the child attends." (Julia, Germany)

Thus, whereas previous studies mainly analyzed parents' choice of the local school against the background of their own value systems and the different capital they possess, our studies point to an additional explanatory factor: the way parents interpret and relate to the institutional context they operate in. In Espoo, the acceptance of local schools seems to be based on a deeply rooted trust in the quality and equality of the Finnish education system; in Mülheim, it can instead be ascribed to the specific stage of education. Differences between the secondary school tracks and, hence, the importance of their careful selection, seem to be completely internalized and not questioned at all. Less significance, however, is attributed to the choice of primary schools – at least by some parents. In addition, particularly for many dual-earner households, the afternoon care options, which differ tremendously between primary schools, are often weighed against the 'quality' or reputational criteria. Thus, evaluating the 'hype' around primary school choice as exaggerated allows parents not to strive for the 'best' schools, but to rather use different choice criteria and to choose more 'ordinary' ones.

Finland: rejection of the 'competition society'

Both studies revealed similar concerns about potential competitiveness, social pressure and an overly 'elitist' socialization as crucial explanations for parents' rather unusual practice of ruling out the 'best' schools. At the same time, however, the interviews revealed two striking differences between parents' motives. In the Finnish study, parents' avoidance practices were strongly related to their rejection of any kind of perceived introduction of the 'competition society' into schools. They were deeply concerned about a selective education system separating children by their educational achievement and – de facto – by their socio-economic background.

"I wouldn't want to make a huge distinction that there are [selective] top schools and so on. These specialised local schools, fine, we should have them, but I wouldn't want any elite top schools, because then it steers the system so that only the really wealthy or really brainy go there." (Markus, Finland)

Even though parents were well aware of schools or specialized classes that might yield more exchange value for their children's future, they supported the idea of equal education for all. Their view of good education involved a concern for equality and integration (Kosunen, 2016). As a consequence, dilemmas between being a 'good citizen' and being a 'good parent', frequently emphasized in previous research studies (Oría et al., 2007; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007), seemed not to exist for this minority of parents in the Finnish study. Their active support of equal education was particularly striking in light of the high sensitivity of education for middle-class families – even for those embracing diversity in other social fields (Boterman, 2013; Bunar, 2010; Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Hollingworth & Williams, 2010). As will be discussed, this confidence may be rooted in their trust in the Finnish education system and linked to a general understanding of social class differences in Finnish society.

Germany: worries about fitting in

In the German case, by contrast, these egalitarian deliberations were almost invisible. Even though few parents discussed the segregating effects of their choices, their doubts seemed to have hardly any impact on their actual practices – or at least, they did not mention them. For them, matching children and schools was of high significance. In contrast to previous studies illustrating that this social matching is one major issue of parental school choice (Van Zanten, 2013), parents in Mülheim were predominantly worried about their own belonging or fitting in. Thus, when describing their concerns of being out place or not feeling comfortable at the 'elitist schools', they did not refer to their children, but almost exclusively to themselves. Although parents in both studies tried to protect their children from social pressure and

competitiveness, parents in Mülheim were additionally worried about the social pressure they themselves might be exposed to.

For instance, I like to joke a lot, but then I sometimes think “Pull yourself together!” I guess you cannot be that natural when you know that there are physicians who pick up their children. And lawyers, who, I don’t know, just are on another level. I wouldn’t say they are better [...] but I think I wouldn’t feel comfortable at that school. (Amina, Germany)

Despite being equipped with high cultural capital, these parents seem to be put off by the reputable ‘best’ schools due to perceived differences in endowment with economic capital and their fear of not being able to measure up to other parents. Based on their perceived differentiation between different ‘types’ of middle-class parents, parents at the ‘elitist’ schools were described as ‘elite parents’, being – or at least acting as if they were – on ‘another level’, a level to which the interviewees thought they did not belong to.

Discussion

Our interviews reveal that there is a small group of middle-class parents whose choices are not exclusively focused on the ‘best’, but rather on ‘ordinary’ neighbourhood schools. The emergence of such similar, but at the same time quite unusual choice practices in clearly different educational contexts is interesting – in particular in light of the demonstrated overwhelming similarities between middle-class parents’ school choice strategies across Europe. Even though some previous studies have already illustrated that parents’ school choice strategies are not solely focused on finding the ‘best’ schools, but on a range of other dimensions as well, parents’ confidence in ignoring norms of school matching and consciously avoiding the ‘best’ schools in our studies was striking – and noteworthy in such a sensitive social field, such as education (Butler & Robson, 2003). The juxtaposition of the two studies and the analysis of parents’ preferences both against their own background and in a comparative way reveal motives going beyond parents’ individual values and ideals, but which are also a result of the different institutional contexts parents operate in.

The described concerns about competitive school culture within ‘elitist’ schools or worries about ‘fitting in’ are likely to be present in other national contexts as well. However, whether these worries translate into school choices steering away from ‘elite’ schools seems to depend on the educational system’s selectiveness and the opportunities and alternatives offered. One explanation for parents’ confidence might be that their unusual choice practices are ‘underpinned’ by the educational system they operate in. Due to the lack of institutional

links between the observed comprehensive school stages and the subsequent ones, there is no necessity to attend the ‘best’ school to proceed securely to the next level – in contrast to countries with high-stakes competition, where the idea of not applying to the most selective schools in an extremely segregated educational and societal system would appear absurd to most parents (for Chile see Kosunen & Carrasco, 2016). Therefore, parents’ rejection does not mean that they do not also strive for their children to attain elite positions in their educational or professional life later. It instead illustrates that they do not consider competition at this stage to be necessary or even helpful to that end.

In the Finnish study, not seeking the most demanding and selective schools and classes is rooted in parents’ trust in the national education system (Kosunen & Carrasco, 2016). In the German study, parents raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system still believe in ‘no choice’ and trust in similar primary school curricula. Moreover, since in NRW parents are not obliged to follow the primary school’s recommendation on the specific secondary school track,³ primary school choice might still be associated with a low ‘risk’. As both systems enable students to achieve the highest levels of education without attending any ‘elite’ institutions, parents can ‘afford’ to avoid the most competitive places and not to strive for excellence. With a ‘good-enough’ school deemed to be adequate (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara, 2013), parents are in a position to consider additional choice criteria, such as wellbeing or spatial proximity.

Despite these similarities of parents’ motives to avoid overly ‘elitist’ schools, the analysis also reveals crucial differences that seem to partly reflect specific national settings. In contrast to their German counterparts, parents in the Finnish study tend to emphasize their worries about a ‘competition society’ being enforced through the education system and parents’ strategic practices. Although increasingly confronted with the trends of individualized responsibility as a consequence of free school choice, the Nordic ‘one school for all’ ideology seems to remain strong, thus promoting parents’ support for social mixing and their rejection of elitism (Kosunen, 2016; Simola, Kauko, Varjo, Kalalahti, & Sahlström, 2017). Instead of considering school choice in an isolated manner, it appears to be linked to a general discussion about social class differences in Finnish society. This resonates interestingly with a wider debate on current social and political discourses embracing market logic and constant competition. Finnish parents’ rejection of competition, social selectiveness and ‘elitist’ schools appears to be linked to the traditional egalitarian ethos embedded in the educational system and deeply rooted in Finnish society and the Nordic welfare state. However, the fact that parents do not mention the dilemma between being a ‘good parent’ and a ‘good citizen’

might also reflect the low risk associated with the Finnish education system.

By contrast, parents in the German study do not seem to be as confident with their decision as their Finnish counterparts. While emphasizing the expected similar curricula and equal chances offered by all primary schools to attend any secondary school type afterwards, the introduction of free choice in combination with their knowledge of diverging school compositions and Gymnasium transition rates seem to nourish doubts about the potentially serious consequences of their decision. In contrast to their Finnish counterparts, parents in the German study seem to be influenced to a greater degree by a neoliberal market discourse and the trend towards individualized responsibility in the context of educational opportunity, thus not rejecting competition, choice and subsequent inequality as steadfastly. They are accustomed to a selective track system and thus torn between primary schools' (traditional) comprehensive character on the one hand, and the system's overall selectiveness and competitiveness on the other. Less egalitarian and more meritocratic principles are embedded in the more conservative welfare regime in Germany, in which the (lower) social position of people tends to be associated with their individual fates (and failures) than with social inequality and disadvantage. The personal concerns voiced by the parents in the German study about not being able to keep up or not fitting in to elitist schools might be based on social distinctions in a Western European society that tends to uphold rather than iron out distinctions between groups of different social status and where these distinctions – in particular between middle and upper classes – seem to be clearer than in Nordic societies. However, we additionally need to keep in mind the slightly lower level of economic capital of the parents in the German sample when analyzing these concerns. Their less privileged position in comparison to their Finnish counterparts is likely to explain their concerns about not being able to keep up – which the more affluent (upper) middle-class parents in the Finnish context are just not confronted with.

Conclusion

Even though parents across different national contexts often report an ideological interest in inclusive education, their actual practices typically contribute to more exclusive education, in what has been described as 'the dissonance created by the clash between liberal values regarding equitable public schools and preference for segregated and advantaged educational circumstances for offspring of affluent mothers' (Brantlinger, 2003, p. x). The quantitatively and qualitatively identified mechanisms of school choice appear to feed into growing

segregation between schools like streams running into a steadily flowing river. These tendencies are well documented also in the Finnish and German contexts (Bernelius & Vaattovaara, 2016; Groos, 2015; Kosunen, 2016; Seppänen et al., 2015). However, our interviews draw a more differentiated picture, revealing parental practices helping to reduce segregation in small currents going against the main flow.

'Excellence', an aspect international trends in educational policy tend to emphasize, does not always seem to be the primary concern. Instead, the 'good-enough' school (Simola et al., 2017, p. 33) often seems to suffice, even to the extent that parents actively rule out schools deemed to be 'elitist'. The findings of our two independent studies do not allow an in-depth comparison of parents' practices. Similarly, our interview data does not allow an estimate of how widespread the described behaviours of 'looking for the ordinary' are, with more research needed into these fine-grained nuances of educational strategies to better understand the phenomenon and relate it to its specific social and educational context. Nevertheless, the similar observations made in both studies and their comparative re-analysis in this paper help in understanding and explaining some of the motivations behind seemingly unusual school choices, providing new elements for developing European educational policies.

The interviews in both studies show that there are families with high educational resources and ethos who are not necessarily focused solely on highly selective elite schools. Our results hint that there may be ways to resolve the conflict between a wish for 'equitable public schools' and to chart a secure educational path for one's own child. In both contexts, the critical questions relate to the opportunity structure in the educational system and a careful understanding of the nuances of parental concerns. Instead of the increasing perception of middle-class parents as strategically 'shopping' for the perceived best schools and at the same time pushing for higher selectivity and growing differences, there are also social forces and choices leading to greater equality – found in these quite different social and educational contexts. If the differences between schools remain small enough and choice is not constrained by fears of being left behind, there seems to be individual-level support for egalitarian educational policies from various different motivations, even among families with a very high socioeconomic status. If this ethos can be skilfully integrated into urban educational policies, it may help develop effective equality strategies supported and seen as justified by parents. To this end, it is important to gain more knowledge about families opting for their own neighbourhood schools or otherwise less competitive environments and more understanding of their reasons to look for the ordinary.

At the same time, our interviews clearly illustrate that constraints in choices may quickly affect people's interpretation of what the risks associated with not attending elite schools might be. If neighbourhood and school segregation grow markedly, the tendency to avoid elite schools may be challenged at any level of education – including (formerly) egalitarian contexts as the Finnish one. Settling for the ordinary is only possible if ordinary is good enough and if it opens the doors to the next tiers of education. Growing segregation, in residential and educational terms, may quickly challenge parental support for educational policies aimed at mixed schools and a relatively non-competitive, egalitarian state school system. This aspect brings educational policies directly into the larger sphere of urban and national policies promoting inclusive communities and carefully supported educational paths.

Notes

1. Due to changing occupations, labour market and income distribution, defining class is becoming increasingly difficult (Devine, Savage, Scott, & Crompton, 2005). Often, class is defined by occupation (Ley, 1996) or income. However, since class is becoming more cultural (Bennett et al., 2009) and parents' cultural capital is crucial in schools and for school choice (Lareau, 1987), defining middle class by educational attainment is seen to be a sufficiently approximate indicator (Blokland & van Eijk, 2012; Nast & Blokland, 2014).
2. Since the interviews were conducted in Finnish or German, all quotes in this paper were translated.
3. Since each of the 16 German federal states has individual responsibility for education, education systems differ slightly between them, for instance in the transition regulations from primary to secondary school. The transition is generally based on the primary school's recommendation, reflecting a pupil's level of achievement. However, whereas in some federal states the subsequent and thus final decision is taken by the primary school or depends on the fulfilment of performance criteria, in NRW it is taken by the parents themselves.

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